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THE OBJECTIVE ABSOLUTE IN ENGLISH.

There are two well-marked methods of dealing with the grammar of our present English. The practical teacher will strive to establish such practical categories as may best represent the doctrine of good usage. The historical student of the language, on the other hand, resolves these practical categories into their original parts, and finds the highest grammatical significance not in how we now say things, but in how we have come to say things as we do say them. It is perhaps good enough for practical purposes to teach that in such expressions as "the more the merrier," the function of *the* is adverbial, or that a certain group of verbs like *may, can, shall, will*, differ from other verbs in the language at the third person singular of the present indicative, but in both cases a knowledge of the earlier conditions of the language supplies the true explanation. And the true explanation, rather than a temporizing one, may be applicable and helpful at an earlier period in training than it is sometimes supposed to be. As to the examples cited, the teacher may decide at what age the pupil shall be told of the original case-form of *the*, but when the proper time for it has come the duty must not be neglected. When the history of *may, can, etc.*, is to be inquired into, then will follow in natural order, and in illustration of important laws in language, an explanation of *need, ought* and *must* as indicative presents of the third person singular. These examples illustrate that class of facts belonging to historic grammar which, it will be agreed, should not be withheld from the upper classes in our secondary schools. Most of the lessons to be learned from historic grammar must, of course, be deferred to subsequent and more extended training. A sense for the merely curious, on the part of both teacher and pupil, must ever be properly controlled—it will else make pedagogic havoc of both. If we but knew at what period in the lad's education the wise Bishop UPLIFAS would have taught his son (provided he had had a son, and had known the given fact) that *bisunjanē* was, historically, the genitive plural of a present participle, we might then have a basis to speculate upon the

time at which an English-speaking boy could with profit be told that *yore* is the genitive plural of *year*.

But I wish to offer a brief comment on the subject brought forward by Professor FRUIT in his article on "The Nominative Absolute." It is a subject which, as he has illustrated, may be reasoned upon in terms and notions derived from practical grammar. Such reasoning, however, has its pitfalls. It is not a simple matter to define the English objective case—that *locum tenens* of all oblique relations. When we say, The sky was clear the whole night, we use an objective case which is not accounted for in Professor FRUIT's answer to his own question, "When is a noun in the objective case?" Nor do grammatical forms in modern English conclusively indicate case: 'It is I' and 'It is me,' serve exactly the same linguistic function, so that if we should come to admit the latter into good usage, we should have to place *me*, in this use, among the nominatives, as we have already done with reflexives like *himself, herself*. If, therefore, Professor FRUIT had insisted that pronouns, which retain the signs of inflection, when used in absolute clauses are prevailingly in the form of the nominative, he would still not have gained an unanswerable argument. On the other hand, it is clear enough that too much value must not be attributed to such an instance as is furnished by MILTON:

Dagon hath presum'd,
Me overthrown, to enter lists with God.

"Samson," ll. 462-3.

Indeed modern English is particularly adapted to the enforcement of the generalization that function in grammar is superior to form.

To arrive at the true import of the absolute construction we may ask such questions as these: What is the thought-relation that is to be expressed? By means of what grammatical device does language in general secure that expression? It is enough for our present purpose to say that the absolute clause expresses an oblique relation—a relation that is chiefly temporal in significance, and that the use of oblique cases for this construction in Greek and Latin is an indication of the true nature of the construction in all related languages. It is this philosophic conception of

the subject that would not permit Professor GILDERSLEEVE to speak of an English nominative absolute. But Professor GILDERSLEEVE had also in mind the fact that English in its period of full inflections had a dative absolute, and in naming its historic survival he aimed at consistency with the terminology of modern English grammar, in which all datives are classed as objectives.

It may be supposed that the nominative forms of the pronouns used in absolute clauses are, after all, a sufficient contradiction to any abstract notion of the nature of the construction. To this it must be replied, that reduced inflections make the adherence to the general principles of grammar all the more necessary. In most instances no case-signs are present in English, but grammatical relations are indestructible; and when the sporadic case-signs of the pronouns, for example, are in seeming contradiction to the nature of the relation expressed, we must look for something special to the history of those pronominal forms, holding fast meanwhile to the grammatical relation.

Let us look at the history of the absolute construction in English. We begin with the dative absolute in Anglo-Saxon (in origin a translation of the Latin ablative absolute); as inflections break down we come upon the transition or "crude" type (*vid.* CALLAWAY, 'The Absolute Participle in Anglo-Saxon.' Baltimore, 1889, p. 2), in which the pronoun remains dative in form while the participle has lost all signs of inflection. But all nouns, as well as the participle, came to lose the inflectional signs of the dative case; we then obtained the 'crude type,' in which both noun and participle, though absolute, were without any trace of inflection. The final act in this history was the admission of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns into this 'crude' absolute construction—a dative absolute in disguise. Now it is clear that these pronouns (and the relative infrequency of their use in absolute clauses is significant) could not change the character of the construction. The conclusion is therefore arrived at that the absolute construction in English, despite the use of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns (the same is true of Italian), is historically the objective absolute.

The digression would lead too far should I, at this point, discuss the re-enforcement of the absolute construction, during the Middle English period, under the influence of Old French and possibly of Italian. I wish however to say that I am not convinced by EINENKEL's distinction between accusative and nominative absolutes (*vid.* 'Streifzüge durch die mittelhenglische Syntax,' pp. 71 f.). No such difference is present to the English consciousness (*Sprachgefühl*); all true absolutes with us fall into essentially the same psychological category, and the occasional use of the nominative pronominal forms is but an indication of an effort to realize the absolute clause as in some way co-ordinate with the main proposition.

The practical teacher will find it simple enough to teach his pupil that the absolute clause is a clause of circumstance (chiefly temporal in sense) and therefore oblique (not nominative) in its true grammatical character; as to designation, the choice lies between 'the objective absolute' and merely 'the absolute.'

JAMES W. BRIGHT.

LES POÈTES FRANÇAIS DE NOS JOURS.—LES PARNASSIENS.

Il faudrait peut-être remonter au XVII^e siècle pour trouver la première des causes qui ont conduit à la formation de l'école parnassienne. Après que MALHERBE eut "réduit la Muse aux règles du devoir," la rime était considérée par presque tous comme un obstacle à la poésie; les littérateurs de l'époque l'avaient en horreur, le grand CORNEILLE en appelait à son frère Thomas pour trouver la rime qui lui manquait, RACINE disait que grâce à elle "il faisait difficilement des vers faciles," et FÉNELON, plus radical que tous les autres, proposa dans sa "Lettre à l'Académie" de l'abolir complètement.

Quel fut le résultat de cet état de choses? C'est que les poètes considérant la rime comme un ennemi avec lequel il fallait lutter plutôt que comme un élément d'harmonie du vers, cherchèrent, sinon à s'en affranchir d'une façon absolue, certainement à la traiter le moins cérémonieusement du monde; si bien qu'à la fin du XVIII^e siècle la rime se trouva reléguée au dernier plan fisante et que plusieurs des écrivains du com-